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A LOOK BACK OVER MY SHOULDER

Garry Fabian

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my grandchildren, so that they may one day learn of their family roots, and to the memory of my parents, grandparents and those members of my extended family who perished in the Holocaust, and all those who exerted a positive influence on my journey through life

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To my daughters, Carole and Vicki, whose urging to record my experiences motivated me to start the literary journey, my wife, Evelyn, the sternest critic of my writing, who encouraged me to pursue the work, and Julie Meadows, whose persistence convinced me to share my story with a wider public.

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1.PROLOGUE

The story of my family and indeed myself is not more special than others, but reflects the many stories of European Jewish families, and what happened to them in the 1930s and 1940s. It also offers a brief glimpse of the movement of those who survived the Holocaust and the rebuilding of their lives, both across geographical and cultural renewal.

There was an American television series in the early 1960s called *The Naked City*, which dealt with law and order in New York. While the show was not very memorable, at the end of each episode a voice-over announced: "There are eight million stories in the Naked City - this has been one of them." There are

millions of stories about the fate of European Jewry and the small remnant of survivors. Perhaps this story is also one of them.

The past often changes, even in our own memories, with the passage of time. Outlines become blurred, facts recede into the distance and it is difficult to recall events with any degree of accuracy. It is important, though, to make a record as accurate as human memory permits for future generations, so that they know about the events that took place during a time of global upheaval, on a scale never before witnessed in human history.

Finding a starting point to any story always presents a challenge to the writer. Selecting an event marking a definite divide between the old and the new worlds of my life seemed to be the logical beginning of this narrative, which looks back over almost seven decades.

It was a cold wintry morning in July 1952, typical of Melbourne winter mornings. I stood up in the Melbourne Magistrates' Court, not because I had broken the law, but to become naturalised as an Australian citizen. In the 1950s these ceremonies were conducted in the cold sterile atmosphere of the Magistrates' Court. Later they were held in the more congenial surroundings of the local town halls, with some pomp and circumstance.

The Magistrate in charge of the proceedings called on me to renounce my allegiance to my homeland, before taking the oath of allegiance to the Crown....

At this point I must go back in time to trace the events of almost two decades preceding this morning.

2. SETTING THE SCENE

My family on my father's side goes back over 400 years in Germany, and most likely considerably longer. The family came from the Pomeranian town of Kallies (Kalisz). The first official record can be found in the town chronicle in Kallies (now part of Poland). In 1602 it was recorded that in consideration for services rendered to the local Land Graf (local gentry) "Jew Fabian was allowed to purchase a plot of land." This was a most unusual event, as Jews generally were not allowed to own land during that period. While the records available to me are very sketchy to say the least, I understand that the family lived there until the time of my great grandfather. My grandfather, Albert, moved from Kallies to Berlin as a young man, and lived there until his death in 1935. He married my grandmother, Johanna Baron, and they had four children, Ernst, Manfred, Hanna and Leo. Manfred, my father, was born on 10 September 1899.

On my mother's side, the family has been traced back to the late 1200's in the area surrounding Heidelberg and Manheim, but this is from verbal snippets my late mother told me and I do not have any more details. My maternal grandparents, Salo and Augusta Frisch, had two children, my mother, Paula and her younger brother, Alfred. My mother was born in Heidelberg on 30 August, 1908.

My parents were married on 26 June 1932 in Berlin. After the wedding, my parents moved to Stuttgart where my father was employed as a tobacco salesman. I was born in Stuttgart on 11 January 1934 and named Gerhard, as my mother admired the famous poet Gerhard Hauptmann.

3.EARLY DAYS

Our first stop is an event that took place almost a year before I was born. This event was to alter the course of my life, as well as that of tens of millions of people around the world. The date was 30 January 1933, when Adolf Hitler became the power that was to rule Germany for the next twelve and a half years. Life became difficult and restrictive for those who did not fit the image of the new order. If you happened to be Jewish, life became even more difficult, with severe restrictions and officially encouraged daily harassment.

I was blissfully unaware about the events that went on around me for the first four and a half years of my life, and only learned about them later.

An amusing incident took place when I was about eighteen months old. My mother's cousin was visiting us in Stuttgart and took me for a walk in my pram. A couple of men stopped her in the street, and one said to the other, "Look at this child, blue eyes, blond hair and distinctive features, the best example of a true Aryan." This is just a small illustration of the climate of prejudice that had developed in Germany in the 1930s.

After the proclamation of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, life became increasingly restrictive for Jews. In 1936 my family decided that there was no future for them in Germany, a country that had been their home for over seven hundred years. Together with my maternal grandparents, they purchased a surgical instrument factory in neighbouring Czechoslovakia and emigrated there. While the move made sense at the time, with hindsight it is obvious that they did not move far enough to escape what was to happen a few short years later.

We lived in Podmokly (Bodenbach) in the Sudetenland, the area adjacent to the German border. This region hit prominence in world headlines as the key factor in the now infamous Munich Conference, when British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, ceded the area to Germany without the consent of the Czech government. He proclaimed that this agreement had secured "Peace in Our Time". Politicians have never been very good at predicting the future with any accuracy.

My recollections of these days are naturally very vague. As a child I lived in a very small and indeed protected world of my own, and did not take a great deal of notice of the larger events about me. I can recall that we lived in a large yellow house, the garden of which backed onto the River Elbe. I used to stand at the back fence in summer, watching barges ply up and down the river. In winter, when the river was frozen over, I remember watching children skate on the solid ice.

My first real recollection of events can be compared to sitting in the sun with your eyes closed, half asleep, feeling the warmth on your face and seeing the bright light through your eyelids as a warm orange glow. Suddenly a cloud

passes over the sun, and it turns dark, with a cold wind blowing over your face. This cloud came over the horizon and was to stay for some six and a half years. The date was 14 September 1938.

4. STARTING THE JOURNEY

The whole family was just getting ready to sit down to lunch, the food steaming on the table, when my father rushed in. In a state of great agitation, he asked, "Have you heard the news? The Germans are occupying the Sudetenland within the next four hours." While I cannot recall the exact conversation following this dramatic announcement, I can still clearly remember my great dismay. The food was forgotten and my parents and grandparents rushed around the house, frantically packing a few belongings and loading up our car with great haste. When you are four and a half years old, lunch has far greater importance to you than any other events, no matter how cosmic they may be.

As soon as we heard the news of the German annexation, it was evident that we had to leave. My mother and I were rushed to the local railway station and put on the first available train ready to leave. My father assuring us that he would follow shortly by car, as soon as he had finalised a couple of urgent tasks. Naturally I did not really understand what was happening at the time, and indeed what was to follow over the next few days. It only became clear a little later on, when I was older, that I was able to piece the events of those days together into a coherent sequence. In fact it was to be many years later that I fully understood the full impact of the events of that fateful afternoon.

The last piece of the mosaic finally fell into place many years later. I was leafing through a small prayer book given to me by a friend of the family when I was born, as was the custom at the time. It had a suitable inscription on the flyleaf, but I discovered a second inscription, obviously written in some haste in my father's handwriting. My father's inscription read: "Dedicated to you and your mother, from your loving father as long as he lives, 14/9/1938."

My mother and I travelled by train to the other end of the country, to Trenčín in Slovakia, not far from the Hungarian border, where friends of ours lived. As we did not hold Czech citizenship and travelled on a German passport, the Czech authorities refused permission for us to stay. It was the ultimate irony, experienced by tens of thousands across the face of Europe in those turbulent days. Germany had by this time declared that Jews were no longer citizens of the Third Reich, and just to give it official confirmation, all passports held by Jews were stamped with a large red 'J' - denoting 'Jew'. As German passport holders, we were in fact stateless, and constantly threatened with expulsion by the Czech authorities.

Literally hundreds of people in this position were taken daily to the nearest border and sent into the strip of territory between countries, known as 'no man's land'. Both countries on either side refused them entry into their territory. A whole army of 'non persons' in the late 1930's spent months on end being expelled, illegally re-entering a country, then being arrested and expelled again.

They became the unwanted and innocent pawns in a deadly game of politics in which they were totally powerless.

After about a week or so after arriving, we left Trenchin again and travelled back towards the centre of Czechoslovakia. A week later, sitting on grimy trains, being shunted for hours on end to sidings off the main track to allow troop transports to pass, we arrived in Brno, the capital of Moravia. There we finally met up with my father and my maternal grandparents.

We found a room at the house of a Mrs Pfeffer, with the five of us living in a room that under normal circumstances was barely adequate for one person. This was our temporary 'castle', living in hiding. If the police had discovered we were living there, we would most likely have been arrested on the spot as illegals, taken to the nearest border and shoved into no man's land with little or no ceremony.

If there was a knock at the door, we would only open it to a pre-arranged signal, living in constant fear of discovery and arrest. After a few weeks, our landlady, fearful of the consequences of being detected with illegals under her roof, asked us to leave. It was practically impossible to find alternative accommodation under the prevailing circumstances. We decide to head towards Prague, the capital, with the hope that we could lose ourselves from the eyes of the authorities in a larger city.

As the general situation throughout Europe worsened and conditions in Germany daily became more severe, a vast number of refugees were moving around Europe. All countries became extremely strict in trying to control the influx of refugees into their territory. Spot checks were set up on highways, at railway and bus stations and any other points of entry. Anyone found without valid documents was arrested and expelled without ceremony or delay.

Once again we were helped by a stroke of luck. We met up with a former employee, a Czech named Pavel, who was also anxious to avoid drawing the attention of the authorities to himself. He had been an active member of the Communist party for many years, and the political climate of the day was not exactly welcoming to people of his convictions. Things were getting a little uncomfortable for him, and he decided that Prague would provide a better place in which to lose himself at that time.

We still had our car, a Fiat designed for four, and the six of us, my parents, grandparents, Pavel and myself, somehow managed to squeeze ourselves into it and headed off towards Prague. Just a few kilometres short of our destination, we were stopped at a roadblock where the constabulary carefully checked documents. There was a hurried conference held in the car on what to do. Pavel assured us to leave things to him and all would turn out well. When our turn came at the checkpoint, he coolly handed his documents to the gendarme and a brief verbal exchange took place between them in Czech, a language we did not then speak or understand. At best our Czech was minimal as German was the official language of that part of Czechoslovakia in which we lived. His documents were examined briefly, handed back and we were waved on. Having travelled a few minutes in silence, my father finally asked Pavel what the exchange with the gendarme was about.

With a grin on his face, Pavel explained, "I told the constable that you were relatives from my village and not very bright. It was no good asking you anything, you would not understand anyway." This produced some merriment, probably more from a feeling of relief than humour. Half an hour later we reached Prague. While we had arrived at our desired destination, in reality our overall situation had not really changed for the better. We still were illegal immigrants without valid documents. The authorities were becoming increasingly more stringent, arresting and expelling aliens. The army of unwilling nomads roaming the face of Europe in search of a sanctuary grew weekly, or even daily, during the dark months of the later part of 1938.

5. A NEW ENVIRONMENT

We found a room to house the five of us that in normal times would have been barely big enough for two people. In one corner was a single gas burner, which served as the 'kitchen', and a cold water tap providing all our cooking, washing and other needs. We had to keep moving from lodging to lodging quite frequently in order to avoid detection by the authorities.

Naturally under the circumstances it was out of the question for my father to seek normal employment. In Europe, and especially during that time, documents were needed for every regular activity. This included legitimately renting a room, dealing with officialdom and most certainly getting employment. We did not possess valid documents to allow, let alone facilitate any official contacts.

Once again, as it had over the past few months, our trusty Fiat came to the rescue. My father, through contacts he had made with friends, met a clothing manufacturer and became his chauffeur. This meant driving him around all day, delivering his merchandise and transporting his clients, as well as running his messages. While I was not aware of the details, there is no doubt that the remuneration was considerably lower than for a regular job as it was an unofficial and illegal arrangement. It was clearly a case of 'beggars can't be choosers' and the good gentleman was aware of this, using it to his benefit.

In order to supplement our less than modest income, my mother engaged in various activities where she could work at home. Such strange items appeared on our kitchen table as soft toys to be stuffed, caps and berets to be sewn and belts to be knitted. Contacts for these various enterprises came through people my father drove around or visited during his working day. She also made chocolates, which my father sold to his passengers and contacts. I recall with great delight I was allowed to lick the bowl clean whenever a chocolate making session took place. As we did not officially exist, my parents could not obtain work permits, so all these activities were of course quite illegal.

Naturally the authorities became aware of our presence after a few weeks. A peculiar sort of lottery developed. We would be issued with an expulsion order, as were thousands of others, enforceable within thirty days. These orders would be ignored, and from time to time the police would round up a number of people, transport them to the nearest border and expel them into no-man's land. The country on the other side of the border would not allow them to enter their area. Under the cover of darkness they would re-cross the border, in most cases the border guards turning a blind eye to proceedings.

It became a cat and mouse game. When the original thirty day period had expired, the authorities would issue a new order, again enforceable within thirty days. During this period we lived a very insecure existence, always casting a furtive glance over our shoulder, avoiding public places where document inspections were likely to occur. Some police rigorously enforced the rules, while others were sympathetic to the plight of the refugees and would turn a blind eye. A sort of bush telegraph developed, transmitting information about which part of the city to avoid on certain days, as unsympathetic police were on duty.

Somehow we managed to survive in Prague for some five months under those conditions, living a very precarious existence, taking one day at a time. In the background of our immediate concerns were the darkening clouds of war gathering over Europe, becoming more threatening and ominous every day. Rumours of the wildest kind became part of the daily fabric of life. We applied to emigrate to a number of countries, but as 1939 dawned, the world shut its doors to hundreds of thousands of desperate men, women and children, effectively sealing their fate and for millions, signing their eventual death warrants.

As precarious and unnerving as our existence was in Prague, pre-war Czechoslovakia was a free and democratic state with a reasonably stable society. Suddenly this changed, however, and overnight a new and menacing dimension entered our lives. On 15 March 1939 the Germans marched into Prague, and the steel jaws of Nazi Germany that we had eluded twice before - once in 1936 and again in September 1938 - closed firmly on our lives. They were to hold us for the next six years.

6. A COLD DAWNING

I remember my father coming home at lunch-time, announcing that the German army was marching into Prague. It would appear that in our family, significant events in history always seem to coincide with meals. Any event is obviously seen differently by a six year old than by an adult. While I naturally did not quite understand the full significance of the events at the time, I clearly recall seeing the columns of soldiers, trucks and armoured vehicles in the street. The very arrogance emanating from the German military machine sent cold shivers down my spine, and I sensed the embodiment of evil in front of me. Even today I can still feel the aura when recalling that particular day, and no doubt it will remain with me for the rest of my life. It was an omen, an outrider of the evil things that were to unfold in the near future.

Paradoxically our position became better and worse at the same time. With the Germans firmly in control, we were no longer illegal immigrants and were granted resident status. This eliminated the day-to-day feeling of total instability. On the other hand, we became subject to increasing acts of official harassment. One of the first edicts was that Jews could no longer own or drive motor cars, and my father had to dispose of the trusty Fiat overnight. This effectively put an end to his capacity to continue earning a modest living as he had since our arrival in Prague. The next edict issued was one that specified the areas of employment Jews could engage in, placing severe limitations on alternative sources of employment.

The Jewish Communal Organisation in Prague and elsewhere tried to look after the growing army of refugees as best as it could with its limited facilities and resources. However, to rely on charity and handouts, no matter how genuinely given, is at best a demeaning experience. It only served to lower one's self esteem at a time when external authoritarian forces were trying their best to degrade human beings under their rule.

Once again a twist of fate came to the rescue. During the period my family had the surgical instrument factory, my father built up considerable expertise and valuable contacts in this field. In March 1939 the Jewish Communal Organisation was looking for experienced personnel to run its various activities and services to cope with the increasing demands placed on these resources. A position to run the medical and back-up services became available, and my father was employed in the medical equipment section. While the salary was modest, it provided a basic regular income on which we could survive.

We moved to a small flat and our lives assumed a semblance of normality, as far as this was possible under a hostile occupying power whose basic platform

expressed a paranoid hatred of Jews and anybody associated with Jewish values. At that stage I had reached the age when one starts school. I was enrolled at the local school with some misgivings by my parents, as my knowledge of Czech was very limited, or more accurately, still almost non-existent. However six weeks before the commencement of the school year this problem was solved. The official edict was issued that Jewish children were forbidden to attend school. In theory this was a situation every kid dreams about, but the reality was different.

In our building lived Mr Weiss, a former teacher who could no longer teach, as Jewish teachers suffered the same fate as Jewish children. He started to give me private lessons every morning in our home or his flat. I remember him as small, fussy, pedantic man I did not like very much. Lessons included reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as Czech. Whether I learnt a great deal during that year is something I could never quite make up my mind about. What he did leave with me with, and in hindsight I am eternally grateful to him, was the grounding to become an avid reader, a habit that has stood me in good stead ever since. It also became a good substitute for the years of formal learning I missed.

The next school year, 1941/42, the Germans, whose whims were illogical to say the least, allowed a Jewish school to open. This was at the Jewish Communal Centre, and somewhere between fifteen and twenty children attended. It was a new experience to be with a peer group. Our teacher, whose name I cannot recall, was a balding redheaded fellow with an unpredictable and volatile temper. Our academic learning left a lot to be desired. What he did instil in us, however, was a deep consciousness of Jewish history, and a sense of pride in our ancestry. This no doubt had a great affect in giving us the self esteem which helped us to survive morally over the next few years, even if only a small handful managed to survive physically.

The school had very limited space and our play area was the adjoining Jewish cemetery, which dates back to the founding of the Prague Jewish community some thousand years ago. Many famous people are buried there, including the great sage, Rabbi Loeb of Prague, who legend credits with having created the Golem.

This 'playground' helped to instil a feeling of our rich history and Jewish contribution to the general community for a millennium. This was a novel education, perhaps, and far removed from a conventional one, but one that left a lasting impact. Prague itself is one of the great historical cities of Europe, every stone saturated with, and breathing out history. I acquired two lasting legacies during those days, dark as they may have been. A deep interest in reading and a sense of history. Both have stayed with me and have been great teachers as I journey through life.

During that period we were required a yellow star with the word 'Jude' ('Jew' in German) at all times. This was taken to ridiculous lengths. For instance, when we kids were running around in shorts during the middle of summer and not wearing anything else, we had to pin it on our shorts.

Life became progressively more restrictive. In July 1941, Heydrich, the Reich's Protector for Bohemia and Moravia, was assassinated by a group of members of the Czech army-in-exile who parachuted in from England. After this things became even more oppressive for the whole population. One man from the Jewish Community Organisation was executed along with hundreds of other citizens. He was quite innocent and not remotely involved in the incident, although his bike was stolen and found in the vicinity where the attack took place. For each German killed, ten innocent hostages were arrested and executed.

Following this incident, the Germans decided to set up a ghetto and deport all Jews in order to 'cleanse the country' of these 'undesirables'. Theresienstadt, an old military fortress dating back to the eighteenth century, was chosen. Located some fifty kilometres from Prague, it had been a military garrison town and was ideally suited for their purpose. Transports carrying Jews from Prague and elsewhere in Europe started arriving in Theresienstadt in 1941 and continued until the end of the war.

In the meantime life in Prague continued. At the end of the school year in July 1942, the Germans decided that the Jewish school was to be closed. I did not go back to school in a formal sense until after the end of the war in 1945. For the next few months I just drifted around and continued to read a great deal, improving my knowledge in a limited way. I did, however, learn about life and how to look after myself quite quickly during those months. I had always been brought up to stand up for myself and not allow anybody to push me around. Unfortunately many Jewish families held a different view, and taught their children never to answer back, or G-d forbid, to defend themselves. One experience brought the wisdom of my upbringing, and the folly of the opposite view, into sharp focus.

A friend and I were walking down the street one day when we were accosted by about half a dozen louts, aged about fifteen or sixteen, who belonged to Hitler Youth. After the usual taunts and insults, they started hitting us. My friend, who was taught never to fight back, just stood there and took it all. I started hitting back and kicking their shins and put up a great fight. The end result was that my friend came home with a broken nose, two black eyes and lots of blood all over him. I came out of the fight with a couple of scratches and a bit of a fright. It was an invaluable lesson, and from that day on I learned to stand up for myself, no matter what the odds were.

7. ON THE MOVE AGAIN

Deportations from Prague were a weekly occurrence and in November 1942, our turn came. We were to report to a sports stadium, which was the collection point, and the official machine took over our lives. We were registered and given a number, which was to be our identity for the next three years. I became simply number CC988 in the records of the Third Reich.

Once all the formalities, carried out with the traditional German thoroughness, were completed, we marched to the nearby railway station and boarded a train. After a journey of some two hours, we arrived at a railway siding about five kilometres from Theresienstadt. The rail line into the ghetto would not be built for another year. We all disembarked and over one thousand men, women and children of all ages picked up their belongings, one piece of luggage per person, and started to walk the five kilometres. This trek seemed to go on for hours and a contingent of German SS and the local gendarmerie ensured that a steady pace was kept up and no one slacked. After about three hours we arrived in Theresienstadt itself. It is a typical eighteenth century garrison town, surrounded on four sides by stone and earthwork parapets. Inside the four sides of the town, or more accurately a large village, are military barracks, each with a large inner courtyard. It becomes quite evident that it was built in the days when horses played a great part in the affairs of the military and the courtyards were used as parade grounds.

The centre of the village consisted of a large, open village green, surrounded by the public buildings like the town hall, the church and other important buildings. Houses and large storehouses occupied the grid of streets around the square. We were accommodated in the barracks, men, women and children in different barracks, specially allocated to these groups. I was put in the children's barrack. Each 'room', which in reality was designed for the military of the 1750s, housed about fifty to sixty persons on three tiered wooden bunks. We were given hessian bags filled with straw for mattresses, and one blanket of doubtful origin. These mattresses or palliases as they are called, are passably comfortable for a few days after which they become lumpy. They then need constant shaking up for them to maintain even the most minimal semblance of a mattress.

Not only were the rooms overcrowded but even worse was the fact that the overcrowding created another more serious problem. The environment acted like a magnet in attracting fleas, lice and other vermin, adding to the discomfort and becoming a health risk as these 'guests' spread diseases.

The food did not conform to the highest culinary standards, to put it politely! In fact it was practically inedible in quality, microscopic in quantity and most likely quite useless in nutritional value. The soup in reality was dirty water with something floating in it; the bread became as hard as a rock after the first day; small pieces of meat, horse meat, which one could almost assume came from the original horses that ran around the place when it was built was barely edible; and similar offerings that had their origins in sources one did not bother to investigate were our diet.

Many years later, when I was introduced to the literature of Dickens and read *Oliver Twist*, I could draw word pictures which related to my experiences, but Oliver lived in the lap of culinary luxury compared to the swill we survived on.

It has been said that 'hunger is the best cook'. This is true indeed, particularly when you are starving. Anything, no matter how bad or little, tastes like ambrosia and you cannot wait for the next 'meal', if this description can be realistically applied. The surroundings and the nourishment, or perhaps the lack of it, soon took their toll. I came down with measles, chicken pox and whooping cough, all in quick succession. Many children had these and quite a number of them died as a result. It would appear that I had greater resilience than most, because despite the conditions and lack of available medicines, I recovered in a reasonably short time, and life settled into a routine. Perhaps the adage that 'only the good die young' is a reflection of my character!

School was forbidden and no formal education took place. We did have lessons in secret corners, as there were many teachers there. Schooling was intermittent, with lack of facilities, materials and often places to hold these informal classes. There was no organised activity for children until later, when they were drafted into the workforce, so we just drifted around aimlessly.

Transports continued to arrive from Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria and other parts of Europe. By the middle of 1943, some forty thousand people were crammed into a village that in normal times accommodated some three or four thousand inhabitants. Dirt, disease and hunger were prevalent in all corners of the ghetto. The old and frail died in great numbers. Hand drawn carts, which were used as local hearses, were a daily sight, as common as the milk or bread carts in a normal community.

Despite the hardships and misery, an amazing range of activities took place. Some of the finest artists and brains in Europe were assembled in the ghetto. Concerts, plays, theatre and other cultural events flourished. Music and even operas were composed, including a children's opera, *Brundibor*, its performance sanctioned by the ghetto administration. Chamber orchestras were formed and performed concerts. Clandestine religious services were held on Jewish holidays and a whole range of activities uplifted the spirit of the inhabitants, or more accurately, inmates. This cultural life played a considerable role in keeping up the spirit of hope that one day all this would come to an end, and the world would return from this journey into lunacy.

There were some quite bizarre sidelights highlighting the Nazi's zeal to make the world *Judenrein* (free of Jews). I can clearly remember two particular incidents. One was when a Catholic priest arrived, still wearing his cassock, complete with yellow *Judenstern*, and a second, when a German major from the Afrika Corps, still in uniform, but with all the trimmings removed, also arrived in the ghetto. It appeared that both, somewhere, had Jewish grandmothers of which they were blissfully unaware, turning up in their pedigree. As a result they were 'outed' as Jewish and sent to the ghetto, obviously deeply shocked by this unexpected turn of events. If they survived, however, they may have later come to bless their fate as after the war, many Germans looked into their family trees, trying to find a Jewish grandmother as 'proof' that they too were victims, not perpetrators. It would seem that necessity - or more accurately feelings of guilt - is the mother of invention, or in this case, creative genealogy!

With all the transports pouring into the ghetto, it soon became filled to capacity and regular transports left Theresienstadt to go east. At that time we were told people were being relocated to labour camps. Only during the last few weeks of the war did the majority of us learn what had happened to those who went east.

8. A LONG DAY

The Germans had a passion for statistics and record keeping became their obsession. On 17 November 1943 they decided to take a census. The day remains vividly in my mind.

It was a cold drizzling winter's day. At daybreak all inhabitants, some forty thousand, were marched out of the camp and no one was left behind, no matter how old or ill they were. We were marched to a muddy field between some hills. It appeared to be a natural amphitheatre. Rank after rank, each of a hundred people, were lined up. Posted on the low hills surrounding us were SS with machine guns. No food, water, toilet facilities or shelter was provided. SS men and gendarmes endlessly counted and recounted. No one knew what was going on, and the wildest rumours started circulating. As the day dragged on, people started to faint and a number died. It seemed a day without end. In the afternoon, as darkness started to fall, great searchlights lit up the area. Panic started to permeate the whole scene. Finally, close to midnight, the order was given to return to the ghetto. Some three hundred bodies were left behind in the field. To this day I have not discovered if the Germans had a more sinister motive behind this exercise, or whether it was merely just another one of the sadistic turns of their torturous minds.

That day underlined the power structure on which the ghetto operated. The SS men were the administrators and guards and Czech gendarmes, a sort of country police who carried out guard duties. The gendarmes were by and large very decent, and tried to help wherever possible. The SS were a mixture, most of them quite officious sadists. There was one prime specimen, a private of Polish extraction, who used to drive supply trucks. His particular hobby was to run down people with his three tonne truck. He killed a number of inmates in this way.

The *Judenrat*, the Jewish administration, were the nominal authority who ran the day-to-day affairs of the ghetto, but were totally beholden to the whims and instructions of the Germans. To some, they were collaborators, but to others they were seen as trying to minimise the harshness of the German regime. At the end of the day, they were in a no-win situation, and every so often, the whole of the administration was shipped off to Auschwitz.

9. GRIM MAKE BELIEVE

Early in 1944, something indeed very strange happened at Theresienstadt. An official beautification program was started. Buildings were cleaned up on the outside, shops appeared, fancy street signs went up. The large huts in the town square used for war-related production of one sort or another were demolished and a garden planted. The wildest rumours circulated throughout the ghetto. It turned out in the end that a Red Cross delegation was to visit and inspect the ghetto, to make a report to the International Red Cross. The whole project took on the look of a film set. Orchestras practiced in a specially constructed bandstand and outdoor cafes were set up. And the place began to look like a popular spa. It was all a hollow sham. Lewis Carroll in writing *Alice in Wonderland* only had ten per cent of the imagination the Germans displayed in setting up this sham facade, specially designed to fool the Red Cross delegation.

Back in the days of the czarist Russia, when an official visit by the Czar was planned to one of the provinces, a high official, one Potemkin, was instructed to beautify the route the Czar would travel. Potemkin had sham facades erected to hide the utter squalor. It did not take long for what was happening in the ghetto to be labelled as the 'Potemkin Village' by those with a sense of humour. A ditty quickly passed around, which loosely translated, went something like this: *Turning in his grave, Potemkin lamented his efforts had been greatly overshadowed by what was happening in Terezin.*

Apparently the beautification effort worked beyond their wildest dreams. The delegation, carefully chaperoned by the Germans, spent five hours in the ghetto. They saw what they were supposed to see and left to write a glowing report on the conditions in which Jews lived under the protection of 'the kindly masters of the Third Reich'. There was another sidelight, which we only discovered some years after the war. The Germans also made a propaganda film, *The Fuhrer Gives a Town to the Jews*, which I will discuss in more detail later on.

There were some rather macabre sidelights to the clean up operation. Over the years to 1944 many thousands had died in the ghetto, some of natural causes, many of disease or starvation. They had been cremated and their ashes were stored in small cardboard boxes. The Germans decided the ashes were potentially embarrassing to their claims of providing the ideal settlement at Theresienstadt. So, to avoid suspicion during the inspection, the ashes were taken down to the river and dumped. Children were used to carry out this task. While I was not personally involved in this macabre exercise, I heard about it later. With German 'thoroughness' each box was carefully labelled with a name,

and when children discovered the ashes of a relative, they would exchange them saying, "I found your grandfather! When you find my grandmother, we will swap."

At this time I was employed in the tailoring shop. Everybody had to work, no matter how young or old. I was ten years old and very soon I became a 'specialist' in sewing shoulder pads. Most of our 'production' was mending German uniforms that came back from the eastern front. Many of these had bullet holes in them, which provided us with a certain satisfaction, knowing that there was one less of them! While this may not have been a totally rational reaction under normal circumstances, considering our position it was a feeling that did provide some comfort to us at the time.

In mid 1944, the tide of the war was definitely turning. Wild rumours kept circulating about allied landings, as well as news that the war was about to end, but these rumours were just that. They were based on optimism rather than fact. With time, however, we began to see some concrete signs. From the middle of 1944, the United States airforce started daylight raids over Germany. Theresienstadt was in the direct flight path to Germany. Practically every day hundreds of planes flew overhead, and these great black planes brought a glimmer of hope to all of us. Transports to the east continued unabated, week after week, month after month. It was a lottery as to who would be on the next one, and individuals and groups were seemingly picked at random.

Once again, luck or fortune was on our side. My father was in charge of the medical supply store and we were classified as 'essentials'. This gave us a measure of protection, but it was but a tenuous one, as every so often the 'essentials' were the very ones selected to be shipped east. We were sure it was only a question of time before our number came up.

10. LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

As 1944 came to a close and 1945 dawned, rumours kept persisting about Allied advances into Europe. Nothing certain was ever learned, but hope springs eternal. Two people with a sense of humour decided to test the bush telegraph. They passed on the 'information' that twenty tanks had entered Prague. Within two hours the rumour came back to them that twenty thousand American tanks stood three kilometres from Prague. It was an interesting exercise in mass hysteria, fuelled by optimism and despair.

Suddenly in March 1945, transports from the east started arriving in the ghetto from concentration camps. These contained human wrecks, which the Germans started clearing out of Poland and East Germany as the Russian army advanced. This was part of their frantic bid to remove the evidence of their atrocities. Many of these people had been in Theresienstadt. At this point we all learned the whole horrible truth of what had happened. The majority had been in Auschwitz, and this was our first real confirmation of the mass extermination. True, there had been rumours over the years that filtered back somehow, but very few people were told of these rumours. Of those who heard them, most refused to believe them as it was outside normal human comprehension to accept what was happening.

It became obvious that the Germans planned something diabolical in Theresienstadt as their final act. Strange constructions were being built on the outskirts, and the bush telegraph spoke of gas chambers, large moats that were to be filled with people and flooded, and similar plans in the making. Great unrest swept through the ghetto. A new menace also threatened. The human wrecks coming back from the east brought typhoid with them, and an epidemic broke out which ultimately claimed three thousand victims.

The Germans were engaged in frantically burning records, and shipping stores out in daily convoys of army trucks. Something was in the air. An atmosphere of anticipation, fuelled by hope, pervaded the ghetto. Despite the threat of diabolical German plans consistent with the pattern of their behaviour over the past twelve years, it seemed that perhaps that some light was appearing at the end of the tunnel. There was hope that the nightmare would soon end.

Spring had come again. It was May 1945, and we had been in Theresienstadt for almost three years now. To an eleven-year-old this is almost a third of a lifetime. I could only vaguely recall life before I came there. One night, on 4 May, a great deal of shooting took place around the ghetto. Everyone was terrified. Was this going to be the Germans' final act of destruction? So near to

the end and all seemed to be lost. It felt as if it went on for hours, but towards dawn it suddenly stopped and all was silent.

Hours passed, but all remained still. A few of the more adventurous souls ventured outside. The Germans had simply vanished, as in a puff of smoke, and not a single one was left. The word spread, and people everywhere rushed out to see for themselves. There were knots of excited people everywhere, talking, laughing or just standing around looking up at the morning sky. I was amongst them standing in the street.

Suddenly a low noise was heard. It sounded like some large motorised vehicles in the distance. "My god, the Germans are coming back," somebody cried out. Great consternation broke out. Before anyone could take action, three tanks came around the corner. They were Russian tanks. It is doubtful if the Red Army ever got a more enthusiastic welcome anywhere in the world than those three tanks on that day.

It was over! The nightmare had finally ended and freedom dawned for the fifteen thousand inmates still left in the ghetto. But the after effects were still to take their toll, and for some three thousand typhoid victims it was too late. They died in the weeks after the liberation.

Forty-eight hours after the Russian tanks arrived, the International Red Cross moved in and took charge, in conjunction with the Russian army. At that stage, food and medicine was brought in, as well as doctors and nurses. Some amazing scenes were to be seen. Many of the inmates spilled into the adjoining countryside, taking hold of property the Germans had abandoned. Horses were brought in, and one fellow when asked what he would do with the horse, scratched his head and said, "I don't know, it's spoils of war."

The reality of what happened started to sink in. Many were the only survivors of their whole family and did not really know where to go. It was difficult, often impossible to return to normality after what had happened over the previous six years. While we did not know what had happened to my grandparents, in our hearts, we knew that the chance of their survival was almost nil, but hoped that we were wrong.

11. RETURN TO NORMAL

We stayed on in Theresienstadt until late July, and then returned to Bodenbach, called Podmokly in Czech, the town we had hastily left in 1938. The family business confiscated by the Germans and run as a German enterprise, now became booty of war and the Czech government nationalised it. While our family claimed compensation, this was lost somewhere in the system and never came to anything. Our family, however, could be described as fortunate. Both my parents and I had survived. My grandparents on my mother's side, my grandmother on my father's side and the rest of the family had perished. We decided Europe no longer had any attraction to us. It was time to seek a new world, a world where greater opportunity could be found, without living with the ghosts of events that lurked in every corner of Europe.

Letters via the Red Cross went out to our relatives in Australia and Brazil. Two of my father's brothers, Ernst and Leo, had migrated to Australia before the war and a cousin had migrated to Brazil. Finally the world had decided to admit that small remnant of victims of persecution to which we belonged. Our visa for Australia arrived some weeks later. We were among the first to be included in the Australian post war change of heart on immigration. A visa from Brazil arrived a week later. Had the order been reversed, this story would have probably been written in Portuguese. Chance indeed plays a great part in human destiny.

While we had our permit, it was to take some two years before we actually made the journey. Transport was at a premium, all countries utilising their shipping to repatriate their armed forces. Immigrants had to take their place in line and wait their turn. We returned to a normal life. My father started a new business in the medical supply field, a number of his old pre-war contacts being most helpful in this direction with the help of a number of his old pre-war contacts

Even I had to return to a normal life. For the first time in my life, and I was eleven and a half years old by now, I went to a regular school. Fortunately over the years my Czech had become fluent, and I was able to fit in quite well. Considering my lack of formal school experience, I kept up with the rest of the class and my results were remarkably good. Many of the other children had also missed a lot of school during the war, but despite that, they still had a lot more formal schooling. All schools operated six days a week in Czechoslovakia, as they do in many parts of Europe, which helped me to make up for some of the missed time.

We knew that our departure would eventuate sooner or later, and that I would require a further transition. This would be the third in my life. I started 'school'

in German, was now at school speaking Czech, and in due course would have to attend school speaking English, a language that was completely foreign to me. My parents decided I should start learning English, so that when we did finally leave for Australia, I would have some grounding.

A middle-aged spinster was found to impart the mysteries of the English language to me. I believe her claim to fame when it came to the English language was that she had spent three weeks in England early in her life. Looking back, I suspect her grasp of the language was less than perfect. I remember very clearly the first book in English she presented me with. It was *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Unfortunately when we did arrive in Australia, I did not find too many pirates or indeed talking parrots, which made all those wonderful words I had learnt in the book a little irrelevant.

In fairness, I did learn a few rudimentary phrases, those famous ones in travel guides one recites with great amusement, like: *I have a toothache*; *Where is the railway station*; or *I will be pleased to have a cup of tea with milky lemon*. Still I suppose she did her best.

At this point, it was also suggested that I undergo a name change. My uncle in Australia wrote to suggest that no-one in Australia would be able to pronounce 'Gerhard' and I should call myself 'Garry', so Garry I became.

As the months went by, the Russian influence became more marked and the political climate became a little tense. I sensed a certain anxiety around the house. Our efforts to obtain passage to Australia increased and many letters were written here and there. There were also other complications. My father had never learned to speak Czech, and after the war, to speak German in Czechoslovakia was quite dangerous, and one did so at one's peril. He travelled extensively for his business and we were always a little concerned. He overcame this problem by an ingenious device. Somewhere he obtained a little Swiss lapel badge, and wandered around the countryside for a long time pretending to be Swiss. He successfully carried on with this charade until we left to come to Australia.

There was an interesting sidelight. As a result of Germany defeating Canada in the World Cup ice hockey championship, Czechoslovakia went to the top of the points table and became world champion. Suddenly everybody spoke German openly again. Sport, particularly when national pride is at stake, overcomes prejudice and politics.

12. AN IMPORTANT MILESTONE

While our preparations for leaving for Australia were going on, another very important event took place. As my thirteenth birthday approached, the time had come for me to have my bar mitzvah. Thirteen-year-old Jewish boys in the areas that had been occupied by Germany were a rare phenomenon, and indeed an almost extinct species by the mid 1940s.

Our rabbi before the war had by some miracle survived a number of concentration camps and returned to Bodenbach after the war. The small Jewish community there was a totally different one after the war. Before the war, the community consisted of around four to five hundred member. Only a handful of the pre-war congregation survived and most had spent the war years in England, returning at the end of the war. At the time of my bar mitzvah between a hundred and fifty and two hundred lived in the district.

For some months I was instructed and diligently learned my Torah portion. The great day dawned and I went through the ceremony with flying colours. This great event was followed by a family dinner at home. Some twenty people, who were the remnants of our friends, came from all corners of the country to take part in this great occasion. The odds of my having arrived at that stage of life were quite astronomical. During the four years from 1941, some fifteen thousand children under the age of fourteen had passed through Theresienstadt. By May 1945, only some one hundred and fifty had survived.

Having put this milestone behind me, life continued to flow along. We waited for definite details of our travel plans to crystallise. Finally a few months down the track, the arrangements started to fall into place. Our trip was to be a rather convoluted one. With shipping still at a premium, a strange combination became available. We were to travel to France by train, then by ship to New York, fly to San Francisco, and from there, take another ship to Australia.

An air of anticipation settled over the household. Our belongings were packed up in large wooden crates. As the state controlled what one could take out of the country, the contents of these crates had to be inspected and passed by officialdom. Two government inspectors duly came to inspect our belongings and make sure we did not take anything the state might want. After consuming a bottle of my father's best brandy and giving the crates a cursory glance, they issued a certificate and nailed the crates shut with some ceremony. Impressive official seals were affixed. As we lived on the second floor of an apartment house and there was no lift, it took four men to manhandle the massive crates down to street level and load them on to a truck. (Incidentally when the crates

were delivered to us some months later in Australia, one man handled them without too much trouble.)

When I mentioned at school that we were going to Australia, most of the other children were quite vague about where this might be. The general consensus was that it was somewhere in Africa. Our geography teacher was a little more enlightened, and producing an atlas, pinpointed its location. He did however warn me quite seriously to beware of being speared by blacks, and when I walked down the main street to look out, as kangaroos attacked people as a matter of course.

At about this time an Australian film, with sub-titles naturally, was showing in the local cinema. It was *A Bush Christmas*, starring Chips Rafferty, and we went to see it. It confirmed my teacher's warnings and I had some trepidation of what to expect. I wondered if the sheep had read *Treasure Island* in order that we could communicate.

13 HEADING 'DOWN UNDER'

Finally the day of our departure arrived. We packed our cases and after some pre-travel panic that occurs in any household, we were off to the local railway station. We spent a few days in Prague and then boarded the train that would take us through Germany to Paris. My mother's brother had survived the war living under cover in France and now lived in Paris. Our train stopped at various stations in Germany, then under military occupation by United States and British forces, and we were not allowed to leave the train. We even stopped in Stuttgart, the city in which I was born, but the US military would not permit anybody to even step on the platform.

We arrived in Paris and a joyful reunion took place. Uncle Alfred had married and I had a cousin who was one year old, but not really of great interest to me at that stage. We spent a couple of weeks in Paris, which I found fascinating, even if I could not communicate with anybody except my relatives. I remember one incident that occurred during our stay. My uncle took my parents to the Folies Bergeres to see a show. I was not allowed to come, as at thirteen I was considered too young to see 'ladies with no clothes on'. I was cross about this for a long time to come!

From Paris we travelled by train to Grenoble to visit an aunt and uncle of my mother's who had also survived the war. We spent a week with them, and for the first time in many years I had some contact with my wider family.

Our ship for America was to leave from Cannes on the French Riviera. We travelled from Grenoble to Cannes by bus and this was an experience in itself. It appears Napoleon went that way some time before we did, so the road is called the Route Napoleon. It is a scenic route that traverses the French Alps, snaking along the mountains. With a five hundred metre cliff on one side of the road and a thousand metre drop on the other, a good head and stomach are pre-requisites for travellers. We thought our number was up when the driver, going around some of the hairpin bends, took his hands off the wheel, tucked the wheel calmly under his chin and started rolling a cigarette!

However, once again our number was not called and we arrived safely in Cannes. For the first time in my life I saw the sea and palm trees, both at the same instance. We spent a couple of delightful days in Cannes and even saw a Grand Prix motor race. Streets were blocked off and seeing those incredible racing machines – to me anyway - roaring around the streets at terrifying speeds was another new experience.

Early one morning we boarded our ship to begin the next leg of our journey. It was a Polish ship of the Gdinga-America Line called the *Count Sobieski*. The next stop was New York. It took five days to travel from Cannes to New York. There were quite a number of Americans on board and I started to pick up a smattering of English. One group was a contingent of Negro (now African-American) Baptist ministers and their wives who had been touring Europe. It was a new experience for me. Not only was it my first live meeting with Negroes but I also learned that it was not only Jews who were persecuted. Some of the stories they told us, despite the language barriers between us, were quite hair-raising. It put a whole new slant on what one had learned about America – ‘the home of the free’.

In New York, a friend who had emigrated before the war, showed us around for the day and a half we spent in the ‘Big Apple’. It was quite overwhelming to see the place, particularly for me, whose knowledge of the wider world was limited. I was amazed by the size of the buildings, the traffic and the city itself.

From New York we flew to San Francisco on a DC3. It was my first experience on a plane and it was quite awesome. The flight took some twenty-one hours. (Today the same trip by fast jet takes about four hours). We landed in several places for refuelling stops. One of the stops was in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and there I met a real live Red Indian. He was quite different to the ones I had met in the Westerns I had read avidly.

When we reached San Francisco we again only stopped for a day and a half. There I learned that officialdom is the same anywhere in the world. We had been in America for all of three days, but before we could board the ship, we had to make a declaration of our earnings during our stay, so that we could obtain a taxation clearance. The ship awaiting us at the dock was a converted troop ship named *Marine Phoenix*. This was perhaps an appropriate name for our journey to a new country as our lives had also risen from the ashes.

The voyage of three weeks was not particularly exciting, but there are a few incidents I can recall. There were a number of Australians on board, which was a novel experience. Two middle-aged gentlemen remain clearly in my memory. As soon as they sat down to any meal, they poured salt and pepper on the food in copious quantities, before even tasting it. When on the first morning they proceeded to treat their grapefruit that way, my amazement knew no bounds.

I did continue to try and learn English, but from the English I had heard so far on our travels, I began to have grave doubts that the information we had been given in Europe was correct. What these Australians I met spoke bore not even the vaguest resemblance to English. I started to assume that these were the Aborigines my teacher had spoken of. I also assumed that because they had been away from Australia, they had faded and did not look black at all.

We had three stops on the way, in Samoa, Fiji and New Zealand. After the first few days we discovered there were some fifteen Jewish families on board, some from Europe, some from South America, and one each from Sydney and New Zealand.

In Samoa we had our first taste of the fact that tourists are treated as suckers anywhere in the world. The ship stopped for three hours and a Samoan with a bus offered to show us around the island. As our funds were quite limited, there was some hesitation. He offered us a great deal for fifty cents per head, and this seemed very reasonable. Off we went and he stopped at the other end of the island. We got out, walked around and picked up some coral. Looking at our watches, we piled back into the bus, as the ship was due to leave in an hour. The driver made no move. After a few minutes one of the group, mustering all his English, inquired if it was not high time to return. "First you must give me a dollar per person," he replied. We protested that we had already paid. No, he assured us, that was only for the first half of the trip. As we had to get back to the ship, with no choice and a lot of muttering, we parted with the money out of our dwindling supply.

The next stop was Fiji, where we stopped for all of eight hours. I cannot remember a great deal of Suva from that occasion. What I can vividly recall, however, was that a couple of hours out of Suva, we ran into a storm and for the first time in my life I was seasick. My fervent hope was that ship would sink and I would be put out of my misery. However, all these thoughts disappeared the next day when the storm passed and the sun came out.

Between Suva and New Zealand we celebrated Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and the captain provided us with a large cabin where we held services. It was quite a novel experience - a synagogue afloat. In Auckland, we had a pleasant surprise in store. The passenger from New Zealand had cabled ahead and we were met by representatives of the local Jewish community, who bestowed hospitality on us and showed us around during our day there.

14. A STRANGE NEW WORLD

Two days after leaving New Zealand we arrived in Sydney and stepped ashore in Australia. Once again the Jewish community was on hand to look after us. Most of the other immigrants were destined for Sydney, but we were to travel on to Melbourne. The ship arrived in the morning, and after having spent the day in Sydney, we took the night train to Melbourne. Time had taught me to be a train traveller and to associate travel with discomfort, which was just as well. The train was crowded and a drunken soldier kept putting his head on my mother's shoulder and going to sleep. Just to add to the discomfort, in the middle of the night we reached Albury and had to get out to change trains, which was necessary before the standard gauge rail was introduced. Still, we had had worse journeys in our time.

At least the trains were punctual and at 9.00 am sharp, the train pulled into Spencer Street Station. My uncle on my father's side and his family were there to meet us and we were taken to our temporary lodgings in St Kilda. The day we arrived was Kol Nidrei, and the next day, our first full day in Melbourne, Yom Kippur. It was the first year after my bar mitzvah and the first time I fasted for the whole day. I did not think I would last through the day, as hunger pains crept up on me. How quickly one forgets, I eventually said to myself, remembering that I had had years of practice. This cured my hunger and the day became a test of will for me.

A few days later I was sent to school. It was St Kilda Park Primary School, and for all that I understood of what was going on, I might as well have gone to Hottentot school! Surprisingly after three weeks I started to pick up English quite rapidly and could make myself understood. We were ahead of the wave of immigration of the late 40s and early 50s, and anything foreign was looked on with suspicion, or grudging tolerance at best. To eat rye bread was to be labelled as a 'reffer', the only spaghetti one ate was cold out of a tin on bread, and coffee came out of a jar with the brand name 'Turban'. In those days you adapted, or were looked at as an outcast. My early training at adapting came in very handy, but personally I didn't experience any marked prejudice.

Some weeks later we moved to Thornbury and for the last six weeks of the year I attended Wales Street Primary School. Because of my age, not academic qualifications, I was put in sixth grade, which meant that the next year I would go to secondary school. It was decided that I should go to technical school, as my gap in formal education would not really get me very far in the high school system. At the start of the 1948 school year, I went to Preston Technical School. I was the only non-Australian in the school and a bit of a curiosity. I did quite well, except in English, which I found very difficult. I learned to speak quite

readily, but the written part of it proved to be quite daunting. While perhaps the academic standards were not very high, socially I had a happy year. I made quite a few friends and learned a great deal about life in suburban Melbourne.

One memorable experience was attending my first Australian Rules Football game. A school friend, who was a keen Geelong supporter, asked me to come to the football with him. It was all quite strange to me. We got on the train and went to Victoria Park in Collingwood. I was quite puzzled as I could not see a park, only a football stadium. It was packed. We stood squeezed between a horde of people and I was told that we were in the 'outer'. I did not understand that either, because we had come in through a gate, where the man took our shilling, so how could we be outside? Still, it would all be explained in due course no doubt. (Was it the same conundrum as the story of the blackberry perhaps, which when it is red it's green?)

The game started and I enjoyed watching. There was a lot of yelling and shouting and I naturally took my cue from my friend. I yelled the same as he did, "Ya mug, wha'd you do that for?" and similar words of assistance to the men of the team in blue and white, who were being mauled by the fiends wearing black and white striped jumpers.

Suddenly I found myself lifted bodily by the scruff of the neck. I looked around and the largest man I had ever encountered was my assailant. "What did you say kid?" he yelled at me, his face not exactly that of a kindly uncle. I knew that discretion was the better part of valour at a time like this and, trying to be as calm as possible while my knees shook like castanets, replied, "Nothing sir." "That's all right then," he muttered and put me down. For the rest of the afternoon I remained very silent. On the train going home, my friend wanted to know if I'd had a good time. While I did not really understand all that transpired, I did have a good time and to this day follow the men in blue and white. My original opinion, formed in innocent arrogance of the men in black and white, was later confirmed and I still hold it to this day.

At that time, my father worked at Ogden Industries in East Oakleigh (now Huntingdale). They manufactured Lockwood locks, but had also established a section manufacturing medical syringes during the war. With his background in the industry, my father was employed as an 'expert' in this area. He travelled from Thornbury to East Oakleigh every day, initially by public transport. This was very inconvenient as well as time consuming and at the end of 1948 we moved to East Malvern, which was a lot closer to his work. It also meant I had to change schools once again. Caulfield Technical School was just near us, making it the logical choice. I took my report book and went to see the headmaster, a Mr Buchanan. He looked at my report book and told me I could start in Form Two (Year Eight) when the new school year commenced in February 1949. I would be fifteen by then and my ability to stand up for myself came to the fore once again.

I explained to Mr Buchanan that I had missed a lot of school and that for my age, I should be in Form Three (Year Nine). I doubt that he had struck anything like me before. He was a stern disciplinarian from the 'old school' and was quite

taken aback at such a request. After some discussion, he finally, very grudgingly agreed to put me in Form Three for six weeks. If I did not fit in or keep up, back to Form Two I would go. By rights, in his opinion, this was where I should have been. "And don't think that I will not be watching you very closely indeed," were his parting words.

I stayed in Form Three for the whole year and at the end of 1949 obtained my Junior Technical Certificate, the basic qualification needed to obtain a trade apprenticeship. My marks were reasonable and I even managed to pass English.

My ambition had always been to become a veterinarian. However this required university study, and four and a half years of formal schooling between Grade One and Form Three were hardly a good grounding for such ambitions. My second love was to do something practical, as, even as a child, I was always tinkering with tools and playing with batteries and wires. So, becoming an electrician was the obvious choice and my best option was to try for an apprenticeship.

15. JOINING THE WORKFORCE

In Melbourne in the early 1950s full employment was the norm and I applied to several firms in Melbourne for an apprenticeship. I went to several interviews and was offered an apprenticeship with the well-known company, Oliver J. Nilsen & Co, who were at that time located in Bourke Street in the city. Incidentally they were the owners of radio station 3UZ. I started work in January 1950. All went well and I progressed through the system of work and schooling. In those days a trade apprenticeship took five years, and involved working four days a week on the job and attending trade school one day a week. My classes were at Melbourne Technical College (now RMIT).

To become an Australian citizen at that time, a minimum residential period of five years was required. As soon as this time came, I applied, and after waiting for some months, the application was approved. This had brought me to the Magistrates' Court that particular June morning. After finishing the formal part of the proceedings, the magistrate then gave a short address stressing that we were now full Australian citizens with rights and obligations attached to that status. He added as an afterthought that most of us had travelled a long way to come here. We were handed our certificates on crisp parchment with an impressive looking red seal attached and it was over. The name on the certificate was 'Gerhard known as Garry' which completed my transition from the old to the new.

I stepped out into the street. Life flowed along with a normalcy one expects of a weekday in Melbourne. As the pale wintry sunlight brought me back to reality, I agreed with the magistrate. I had indeed come a long way, not only in a geographical and physical sense. A great deal of life and a huge range of experiences had certainly been compressed into the first eighteen years of my life.

On my first day on the job I was provided with a small assortment of tools and I remember going down the street to buy a Gladstone bag to carry them in. I was then sent out to a job, assisting in the electrical work at a large factory in Sunshine. Living in East Malvern at the time, this involved travelling there and back on the train which took almost an hour each way. My starting salary was a princely 28 shillings & six pence (\$2.85) and my weekly train ticket cost three shillings & six pence (35 cents).

Over the first three months I worked on a variety of projects, moving from site to site as required and fitting in well at the workplace. The policy of the company was that all apprentices should spend some time working in the central store at head office. This provided the opportunity to become familiar with all the

materials used, as well as getting an insight into organisational processes. My second three months were spent working in the central store, where I gained a good working knowledge of the range of materials used, store and inventory procedures and other aspects of the business. While it may have been somewhat mundane, it did provide a valuable basis for a trade background.

Over the next four years I progressed through my trade training and also did quite well in the various units at 'Melbourne Tech'. While in the first eighteen months I worked on many sites, I spent the next three years at a single job site, Prince Henry's Hospital. This job extended my trade knowledge quite considerably, as the variety of work included electrical installation, telephony, and the wide range of tasks involved in a complex and very major building project. I obtained a very good insight into the complexities of a large project, working with many other trades people and architects. As the building progressed and became a working hospital, I also had to liaise with hospital staff. Today the hospital has been demolished and a luxury apartment project, *The Melburnian*, has replaced it.

During my fifth year as an apprentice, I worked on other sites and occasionally on my own, which was quite satisfying. I even managed to obtain a fairly high distinction in the school component of the apprenticeship, coming top of the class in one unit, that of Motor Maintenance. I was awarded the top prize, the Beasley Award, a certificate which I still have. I also received a cheque for three pound twelve and six pence (\$7.25), then the equivalent of a week's wages.

During that period there was compulsory national service for all eighteen year olds. However, if you were an apprentice you could defer until after completion of the apprenticeship. I registered in January 1952, but deferred my military service until the completion of my apprenticeship. I will come back to that a little later.

My father has started a small medical supply business in 1949. Around this time he also had a heart attack from which he recovered quite well, but as time went on, his health started to decline. By the time I had finished my apprenticeship at the end of 1955, he had occasionally talked about wanting me to come into the business, but I had been keen to follow my trade. However, when my father had another mild attack in mid 1955 and his health continued to deteriorate, the obvious solution was for me to put my trade on hold for a few months and join him in the business.

While I had helped out after hours for some years and was quite familiar with the products, actually going out and selling was something else again, and totally alien to me. I remember my very first task in this field. My father had been offered a quantity of stainless steel trays - I believe they were factory seconds - at a very attractive price. I had to call on butcher shops, offering these for sale, as they were better for window displays of meat than the enamel trays used in those days.

For the first few days I felt very uncomfortable doing this, but surprisingly, I generated many sales and at the end of the first week, felt quite at home in my new role. I even started to enjoy it!

The business dealt with doctors and hospitals, as well as supplying first aid supplies to factories and industry. After a short time I took to calling on these diverse clients like a duck to water, and started having a string of successes in my new career. However, while I enjoyed the work, it was never my intention to see it as a permanent career path.

Around this time another important event occurred that was to have a very major impact on the rest of my life. While we attended synagogue during the high holidays every year and my parents had their circle of mainly Jewish friends, I had very few other contacts in Jewish circles. In late 1954 I was invited to a function of B'nai B'rith Youth (BBY), a Jewish youth movement, and joined shortly after. I became involved very quickly and this opened new horizons, both culturally and socially.

I will always remember the first meeting. It was held at the Communal Hall at the Toorak Road Synagogue, which holds some two hundred people. The guest speaker was the late Harold Holt, then Minister for Immigration, whose signature was on my naturalisation certificate - a link to the point where I started this story. All of eight people were in attendance and before Holt started to speak he looked around, and his opening words were: "Quality will always surpass quantity when it comes to an audience."

This function was the start of an association with B'nai B'rith that has lasted for well over forty-five years. It has become a very integral part, not only of my life, but indeed the life of my whole family. But the roots of this association go back even further, as my late grandfather was a B'nai B'rith member in pre-war Germany and my late father also joined B'nai B'rith here in Melbourne, making me a third generation 'Ben Brith'.

16. WEARING THE QUEEN'S UNIFORM

I had deferred my national service obligations for several years and completed my apprenticeship. After spending six months working in my father's business, the invitation to 'join the Queen's men' arrived towards the end of 1955.

At that time you could do your national service in the army, air force or navy. If you chose the army, you had to complete three months of full time service and three years part time in the CMF (Citizen's Military Force). Service in the CMF involved one night a week and a fourteen day camp for each of the three years. The air force and navy involved six months of continuous service or the option of three months during two consecutive years. There were two national service intakes a year, in January and July. Each intake saw some 12,500 eighteen year-olds join the army, 1,200 the air force and 500 the navy.

My preference was for the navy rather than the army, where most of my friends had gone. There were two reasons for my choice. The first was that you could do it in one straight six-month period, rather than a ongoing three year commitment. The second reason was that everyone told me that I had 'Buckley's chance' of getting in the navy, considering the relatively small size of each intake.

Due to the fact that I had trade qualifications and the luck of the draw, I was picked to go in the navy. The call came in late 1955 and in January 1956 I started my six months stint 'wearing the Queen's uniform'. No wonder it did not fit properly as I have a different build to the Queen!

The initial training took place at *HMAS Cerberus*, a shore station situated on Westernport Bay some seventy kilometres from Melbourne (The joke was that it was the biggest ship in the Australian Navy - 100,000 tonnes of concrete). After several weeks of basic training, I was assigned to the electrical section. This differed from the run-of-the-mill sections of the navy as most of the personnel had a trade background before joining the navy, rather than coming through the naval discipline stream.

Some two months into our training the time had come to actually go to sea on a real ship. We were assigned to the *HMAS Sydney*, then an ageing aircraft carrier, for a seven-week assignment. There was some unhappiness amongst the national servicemen, as all previous intakes had been on ships that travelled overseas. However, in 1955, when ships visited Japan, over fifty per cent of the five hundred national servicemen contracted a 'social disease' by associating with the local 'ladies of the night'.

This episode caused a stormy debate in parliament with politicians gravely concerned with the 'physical and moral health of Australian youth'. It resulted in an edict being issued by the Minister for Defence to the navy, forbidding national servicemen to leave Australian waters. The upshot was that we sailed to Adelaide and the Barrier Reef, which we all considered a very poor second at the time.

Apart from one regular naval recruit, as far as I was aware, I was the only Jewish sailor at the time in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). While I did not seek any special privileges, I did manage to get a week's leave during Pesach on 'compassionate grounds', which was a bonus.

The day we embarked on the *Sydney* the officer-in-charge, a commander of the electrical section, assembled the eleven of us who were assigned to it. He stressed we were under his command and could not be drafted into any other duties. A few minutes later, the petty officer in charge of seamen marched up to us and wanted to assign a task to us. There is a saying in the navy, that 'if it is stationary paint it, if it is brass, polish it or if it moves salute it'. Our task involved painting the ship.

The actual location of the job was a barge on the waterline and the only access was by scaling down a rope on the side of the ship, some twenty-five metres down. This was not my cup of tea and I had no intention of getting involved in this activity. While my companions did not want to incur the wrath of the petty officer, I told him that we had been specifically told not to accept any duties outside our own section. He ranted and raved and threatened to have me punished for gross disobedience. I suggested he consult with the commander of our section, who outranked him by a considerable degree. Just at that moment the man himself came by and asked what the problem was. I explained the situation to him and he tore strips off the petty officer, stating that if he ever tried to interfere with his men again, there would be lots of trouble. So I, and indeed my companions, did not scale down the twenty-five metres to paint the ship. Obviously past lessons learned in self-preservation when I was very young were very useful attributes in other situations.

While I was in uniform, a rather funny incident occurred in Sydney. I had become very friendly with Naomi Porush, Rabbi Porush's daughter, through our association with B'nai B'rith Youth. One weekend the *HMAS Sydney* was in port in Sydney and I had shore leave. Naomi and I went out together on Saturday night and at that time, Rabbi Porush lived in Macleay Street, just down from Kings Cross. The next day the word was all over town that the rabbi's daughter was seen walking through the Cross with a sailor!

While I was in the navy the six months I spent there seemed like a waste of time, but looking back, it certainly did no harm, and in many ways provided an interesting experience. Near the end of our six months the officer in charge of national servicemen gave us a pep talk and invited us to join the Naval Reserve. He gave us glowing accounts of the benefits of such a step. "The only qualification you need is to be fit and to be Australian or British born," he said.

Although I had absolutely no intention of joining the reserve, I could not resist going up to him and suggesting that I would love to join but was ineligible, as I was neither Australian nor British born. He scratched his head, pondered the problem for several minutes and came back with: "Hmm, I don't know, but seeing you have been in the navy for the last six months, it should be all right for you to apply." Needless to say, I did not follow his Solomonic reasoning and ignored his advice.

17. SETTLING DOWN

Just before I went into the navy I met Evelyn Schlesinger, also through BBY, and we started to go out together. Our first date was a B'nai B'rith Ball and I asked her to this by letter while I was somewhere up north on the ship.

At the end of June 1956, I returned to 'Civvy Street', having completed my obligation to Her Majesty the Queen and settled back into normal life. I still had ambitions of going overseas and, as a qualified tradesman, could have got a job - and a free trip - on one of the many overseas liners, which in those days were the regular mode of travel to the United Kingdom and Europe. However, somehow this ambition was never realised. I became more involved in the family business, as well as going steady with Evelyn and becoming very involved with BBY.

The next two years passed quite quickly and in late 1958, Evelyn and I became engaged. Just a few days before our engagement party, my father suddenly passed away, which triggered a number of changes in our life.

My father's death had both short and long term effects on the future course of my life. Any plans I may have harboured regarding changing direction in my work naturally had to be put on hold. The first consideration was to keep the business running and maintain its customer base. The ongoing income for my mother, as well as my plans to get married, required a stable income. Continuing with an established, even if modest business provided the most logical choice.

Several developments took place during 1959. I continued to run the business and our wedding plans were taking shape. The wedding was planned for Christmas Eve and we looked around for a house. Eventually in August we found one that suited our needs and budget. Little did we envisage then that it would be our family home for the next thirty-seven years.

Since joining BBY late in 1954, I had become more and more involved and I became president in 1958. Joining B'nai B'rith at senior level was not something I contemplated would happen for a few years down the track, until I had settled down. However, with the death of my father and my need to preserve continuity, my priority changed once again. As my grandfather had been a member in pre-war Germany and my father a member in Melbourne, I felt that I should take this step sooner rather than later. So, in August 1959, I joined Lodge of Harmony, a journey that has lasted for over forty years and has been a very important aspect of our family's life.

As 1959 drew to a close, the preparations for our wedding progressed. While the business had been based in our family home for ten years, a new direction needed to be found as I was moving to my own home and my mother was looking for other accommodation. We decided to move the business into commercial premises and purchased a property in Glenferrie Road Malvern.

Our wedding took place on 24 December 1959 at Temple Beth Israel, with a reception following at the Chevron Hotel. The reception or 'breakfast' - I have yet to work out why it is called a breakfast, as traditionally it is a dinner held in the evening - was in some ways a departure from the usual practice. Most weddings in those days were in two parts. The older generation, usually relatives and friends of the parents, was invited to the main dinner and the younger guests, friends of the bride and groom, were invited later for supper. It was almost like 'first' and 'second class' guests. Evelyn and I decided this was not what we wanted and after some debate, managed to convince our parents. The result was that all guests were invited to participate in the whole celebration. I can't quite recall when this 'two tier' arrangement at weddings was abandoned, as today it no longer exists.

The day after our wedding, we left early in the morning and flew to Hayman Island for our honeymoon. In those days you had to fly first to Brisbane, then by DC3 to Proserpine and then take a two-hour boat trip to Hayman. This was some twenty-five years before an airstrip was built at Hamilton Island, which is a short boat ride to Hayman. The trip took well over eight hours and by the time we arrived there, we felt as though we had been travelling for days.

18. CHANGES IN DIRECTION

Returning from our honeymoon, we discovered that the family would be expanded some nine months later, as Evelyn was pregnant, which provided a new and unexpected dimension. In September 1960, Carole, our older daughter arrived, setting a new pattern of family life and responsibility.

At that time we expanded the business and took on extra staff, with the aim of diversifying into additional areas. While initially this worked quite well, the advent of a quite severe 'credit squeeze' in the early 1960s saw a considerable downturn in business. While it took a couple of years to make a major impact, we eventually scaled back the business and operated it on a much smaller scale for a number of years, principally from home.

In 1963 the family expanded, with our second daughter Vicki coming on the scene. For the next few years everything flowed reasonably smoothly, through the normal cycle of daily life. Carole, followed by Vicki a couple of years later, started school at Murrumbidgee State School, the local primary school.

Evelyn and I continued to become more involved in B'nai B'rith, serving in various official positions. I became involved with the school committee and other bodies, including several professional bodies, union activities, and later in Rotary, where I am still very active to this day.. As the years flowed by things went along without any major dramas. While business progressed at a steady pace, it provided a reasonable living, but did not cater for extravagances. We did build up a small export segment, which led to my first trip overseas to a trade exhibition in Asia in 1974. I visited the Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia and went on a second business trip two years later to Fiji.

As the business climate changed, there were complex technological changes in our field. It became less and less conducive to run a small business, and the only choices seemed to be to exist as a major player or to get out. At that point, what seemed like a good opportunity presented itself. A long-term acquaintance who ran a small communications business decided to retire and offered to sell me the business. As our business was struggling and the communications business fitted in with my technical background, we closed the medical supply business and I took up the offer. What initially seemed like a very good move proved to be not the case and after two years, the business failed. There were several factors involved, but here is not the time or place to elaborate.

The bottom line was that in 1979, at the age of 45, I had to find employment, as we had no reserves to fall back on. Not one to sit back and lament about what had happened, I went out knocking on doors and following up employment

advertisements. Within a couple of weeks I found a job with Drager, a large German mining equipment firm. I stayed there for almost a year, selling mining safety equipment. It was a very interesting time and I had the opportunity to travel extensively throughout Australia. This included visiting such places as Mount Isa, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, as well as Tasmania, and gaining a very good insight into the mining industry.

Changes in the structure of the company led to the amalgamation of product areas and the rationalisation of staff and I left in early 1980. My electrical trade background, as well as my many years in sales proved to be a very good asset for my next career move.

I joined the large electrical company GEC in their industrial products division as a product manager for electrical and switch gear. This position involved servicing and providing product support for both the manufacturing and wholesaling industry, a very satisfying role. I stayed at GEC for almost four years.

During this period another development took place that was to have a major impact on the direction in which I would head a few years down the track. At the back of my mind I always had an idea that I would like to write, but to be perfectly honest never took this further. Perhaps the lack of time or opportunity, or perhaps the fear of trying and finding out that I did not have the ability, held me back.

One day I was reading through one of the technical publications, a necessity of my job, when I came across an article that I thought was quite convoluted, and did not make any sense. Picking up the telephone, I rang the editor and said to him, "I really cannot understand what the article is trying to convey, and to me it is just badly written and illogical."

Being a typical editor he said to me, "If you are such a smart ass, why don't you try and do better," and slammed down the phone. Normally I am very placid until I am challenged, so that night I sat down and wrote an article on a technical topic. I posted it off to the magazine next morning and to my surprise, the editor rang me a couple of days later, saying he liked the article and would publish it. A couple of weeks later a small cheque arrived and over the next few months the magazine purchased several more articles.

Something during that period also triggered the writing of the first part of my story. Carole spent a year on Machon in Israel during 1979/80. As part of the Holocaust course she took, she visited the kibbutz Givat Chaim, which has a Theresienstadt memorial. Leafing through the card index system, she came across my name and in her next letter home raised a lot of questions. While it was not for any conscious reasons, I had not previously discussed my war time experiences seriously with the children. When Carole returned to Australia, she wanted to know all about them. We sat down and discussed the topic at length and she suggested I should make a written record, leading me to sit down and actually commit some thoughts to paper.

In 1984 massive restructuring took place at GEC, with dramatic management changes. As the whole work climate altered, I decided to leave and worked for several months for another company in the industry. Over the years we had travelled quite a bit locally, whenever the opportunity arose, particularly when the children were a little older. Several years earlier, just after Carole finished her HSC (Higher School Certificate), we went to Malaysia and Singapore, which whetted our appetite for more extensive travel. In 1984, for my fiftieth birthday, Evelyn and I went on a tour of the west coast of America and the next year, to celebrate our silver wedding anniversary, we went on a tour to New Zealand.

In 1985, I took up a position with Simplex, a major company dealing with time recording equipment, once again combining my background of sales and technical knowledge.

19. A NEW CAREER

Since submitting my first article for publication, I continued to write, selling material to several magazines, first in the technical area and progressively in other areas and it became a very nice side line, generating a small income. As you get older, you tend to question where you really want to go with your life and although I was quite successful at Simplex and earned a good income, I increasingly questioned what I was doing there. "Do I really want to sell things to people who don't really need them for the next fifteen or twenty years?" my mind kept asking. On our trip to Europe in 1987, away from the routine of everyday for some five weeks, my inner voice became more strident and the urge to change direction became stronger.

By this time I had built up a reasonable flow of clients who bought my articles. Sitting down I looked at the worst-case scenario. The children had left home, our mortgage was paid off and we did not live an extravagant life style. We discussed my leaving regular employment and I decided I would take a risk and work full time as a freelance journalist. While it has its ups and downs and there are slack periods, it is something I have not regretted and it not only makes life interesting, but offers a considerable amount of flexibility.

My writing has provided many opportunities to travel around Australia, as well as a couple of work related overseas trips and the chance to meet many very interesting people and to go to many places and events.

During these years I also undertook another new venture. I decided to make up for those opportunities that I had missed when I was young. Having left school at fifteen after a very minimal education, I took up tertiary study, enrolling a Bachelor of Arts course off-campus at Deakin University. I successfully completed my degree in five years, majoring in Journalism, Literature and Australian Studies and graduated in 1989. Having been 'bitten by the bug' I went on to do a Master of Arts at Monash University, also on a part time basis, graduating in 1993.

Other important events happened in the family during that decade with two marriages, Vicki to Danny Lustig, and Carole to Kim Carr. In due course our children added five grandchildren the family: Ruth, Jeremy, Seamus, Steven and Kate. The foundation of this next generation provided the family continuity, which, like in so many other families, was almost destroyed by the Holocaust. As most of our extended family perished, our grandchildren provide the living link to future continuity.

20. RETRACING MY STEPS

In 1987, I travelled back to Europe for the first time in forty years and decided to visit Theresienstadt. While I did not know how I would react and had considerable trepidation when the actual day for the visit arrived, I was glad I took that trip. It laid many ghosts to rest for me and in some way served as the closing of a chapter of my life after all these years.

In the physical sense, Theresienstadt, or Terezin as it is called in Czech, has reverted back to the sleepy town it was before the war. It continues to be a military garrison; all that has probably changed over the last two hundred and fifty years is the colour of the military uniforms.

The thing that struck me as a first impression was how empty the place was. There were no people to be seen, a normal enough scene in a small country town, but the comparison between the overcrowded ghetto and this sleepy place was so dramatic, it hit me the moment I arrived. The other huge difference was that I could leave when I wanted and there were no barriers or guards to stop me.

At the time it was before the 'Iron Curtain' had been raised and very few visitors went to Terezin. Although there was a museum, it was principally devoted to the 'Heroes of the Resistance' and only a very small section was concerned with the ghetto.

In June 2001 I was able to add a further piece to the jigsaw of my life. Many German cities had been inviting 'former Jewish citizens' back to their birthplace, perhaps as a way of trying to settle the Germans' guilt feelings, or perhaps out of a genuine desire to right some of the wrongs done to the small remnant of Holocaust survivors.

Berlin started this scheme in the 1950s and other cities and towns followed their example. Back in 1981 I wrote to Stuttgart, inquiring if they had a similar program in place. Their reply was very prompt, informing me that they had made a large donation to the state of Israel and that they felt this was their acknowledgment. About a year later, another letter arrived informing me they now had put such a program in place and enclosing a registration form. After receiving my registration, they acknowledged it very promptly. Their letter stated that former citizens born around the turn of the century would have preference and it would be several years before I could expect an invitation. Every couple of years I wrote to them, inquiring what progress had been made. I always received a prompt reply, thanking me for my patience and indicating that due to others being older and having lived in Stuttgart for longer, I would

still have to wait. There were some six to seven hundred registrations on their books and each year some forty to fifty people were invited.

My wait continued for seventeen years. In 1999 I wrote another one of my letters, but suggested that as the next century was about to arrive, their line about 'those born at the turn of the century' sounded a bit lame. Once again, German thoroughness shone through and I received a prompt reply, this time that on present indications they believed an invitation would be forthcoming in the next couple of years, by 2001.

In September 2000, they wrote that the last organised tour would take place in 2001 and if we were able to participate, a formal invitation by the Lord Mayor would be forthcoming in the near future. This invitation arrived just before the end of December, followed a couple of months later by details of travel and accommodation arrangements, as well as a comprehensive outline of the two-week program in Stuttgart.

In June 2001 our trip became a reality when we left Melbourne airport headed for Germany. Arriving in Stuttgart after twenty-four hours of travel, we were curious and perhaps a little apprehensive about what we would find and how it would affect us. Evelyn also had some reservations, her family having fled Germany just prior to the outbreak of the war.

It was the nineteenth and last year this program would run. Over its life, some thirteen hundred 'former citizens' and their spouses had visited, paid for by the City of Stuttgart. Some five hundred people had refused the invitation, as they felt that it would be too painful for them. Most who accepted came from the USA, South America and Israel. Interestingly, only ten came from Australia over the entire nineteen years, probably because of Australia's restrictive pre-war immigration policy.

The welcome in Stuttgart was warm and cordial and the civic dignitaries could not do enough to make us feel comfortable. They thanked us for accepting the invitation, as a sign that we were ready to forgive what had happened in the past. All the officials and others associated with the arrangements took great pains to stress that they were a new generation, one that did not condone the sins perpetuated by their fathers. Just how much was genuine and how much were well-staged theatrics is hard to say with any certainty. I do believe that there is a new spirit abroad in Germany today and much of it seemed quite sincere. There were over eighty people in our group and the two weeks spent in Stuttgart not only gave us the opportunity to get to know the city and its many attractions, but also provided a better understanding what makes the Germans tick today.

One of the participants who lives in America turned out to be someone with whom I had a great deal in common. Inge Auerbacher, who is year younger than I am, was deported from Stuttgart to Theresienstadt in 1942, where she stayed until liberation in May 1945. She had always assumed she was the only child survivor from Stuttgart and we shared many reminiscences and memories.

She now regards me as her 'adopted brother' through a bond of shared experiences.

Having finished our visit to Stuttgart, we travelled through Europe for an additional four weeks, mainly through Germany. As tourists rather than official guests, this added to the insights we gained in Stuttgart. One of our stops was Prague, a city which has lost none of its graciousness despite the almost endless invasion of tourists. While in Prague, I took the opportunity to travel to Terezin for a day. Although after my visit in 1987, I had decided I would not return again, having made the 'pilgrimage', I changed my mind. There were a number of reasons for this.

In 1987, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic) was still under communist rule and the ghetto museum as such did not exist. Since the fall of communism, however, this has all changed. Theresienstadt is now on the 'tourist trail' and a very large museum is now devoted to the ghetto.

I was curious to find out how the emphasis on the ghetto history had changed and also to compare my feelings fifteen years on. Going to Terezin by a local bus, rather than joining the flood of tourist tours, it was an emotional experience, that also evoked some very sensitive and, at times, disturbing feelings within me.

Since my last visit, Terezin has almost become a ghost town. The army, which had been part of the town for some two hundred and fifty years, had pulled out two years before, dealing a very major blow to its economy. The population, which under normal times was around 3,500 had dropped to 1,800, as there is little or no employment and tourism is now the only real source of income.

I spent a couple of very interesting hours with the deputy director of the museum and we discussed a wide range of topics. As well I wandered around the almost empty streets for several hours, just taking in the atmosphere of the place. I came away with several impressions that really made a very major impact. The first one was that there were shops that not only displayed a wide range of foods, but you could actually go in and buy them. The second was that I went into a small pub and ordered a meal, which was a very strange experience in contrast to my life there during the war years.

One of the features of the museum is the German propaganda film *The Fuhrer Gives a Town to the Jews*, or, to be correct, snippets of the original film, as the complete film has not been found. I have a copy of the thirty-minute film. In one scene, at a soccer match, the camera zooms in for a close up of one boy in the crowd. I am this boy. It was the eeriest feeling seeing the video and myself on a film that for over fifty years, I did not know existed.

I also had another very strange experience, which demonstrates how impressions are deeply imbedded in the mind. I was walking along one of the streets and heard a dog bark behind me. I love dogs and have never had any conscious fear of them. I spun around to look and fully expected to see an SS man with an Alsatian on a lead behind me. I believe I have a fairly logical mind

and can't explain why my brain signalled such a connection. Was it the setting that triggered off this mental picture? Perhaps it was the combination of the setting and long suppressed memories.

The visit did stir some emotions deep inside me, but also provided another opportunity to exorcise some long hidden ghosts of the past.

21 . A JOURNEY TO THE PAST

Recently, in September 2003, I took a journey back to my past, that in many ways evoked painful memories, but also provided the opportunity to arrive at a partial closure after almost six decades.

We were invited to take part by a Foundation in Stuttgart in the project - Signs of Remembrance.

The background of the Foundation, promoting the project, is an interesting one. In 1996 a hostel for foreign students in Stuttgart was torched by right-wing elements, and seven people were killed in the fire. A group of concerned citizens decided to set up a Foundation that promotes anti-racism, fights against prejudice and promotes tolerance and inter-racial harmony.. The name of the Foundation, Geissstrasse Seven, is the actual address of the building, that has been rebuilt, and again is a hostel for foreign students.

The background to this journey is connected to the desire by Germany to remember, and show remorse, for events that took place during the Nazi era from 1933 - 1945.

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Those in the first two transports, were murdered on arrival at their destination, and from the third, there were only a handful of survivors at the end of the war. Only two Stuttgart children in the transports are still alive today, one woman who lives in New York, and myself.

As part of the project, both of us were invited back to Stuttgart, and along with leading members of the foundation, historians, 11 young people aged from 14 - 21, musician, archivists and several others took part in a three day "recreation" journey back to Theresienstadt, following the original nine hour train trip in 1942,

A crew from the local television station also came along, to film and produce a half hour documentary, which will be shown on German television in the near future..

In Stuttgart I visited the house in which I lived as a child, and the current resident, who was the son-in-law of the owner when we lived there in the 1930s showed us around, all this being recorded on camera. The next day I was interviewed for about two hours about my experiences during the war and my time in the in the Ghetto from 1942 until the end of the war in May 1945.

The main Stuttgart newspaper ran a full page story about the project, and almost half a page covered my story, complete with photograph of me as an eight year old.

The opening function, which was well attended, included several speakers, presentation of the concept of the memorial, as well as reading of sections from our

respective books (in German), as well as additional interviews, and question and answer exchanges with the audience.

The next morning the party of over 50, boarded a train, and after five changes arrived in Theresienstadt some nine hours later. The next day an extensive tour of the town, lasting some four hours took place, visiting various areas where I had stayed during the almost three years during my internment. The whole tour was filmed, with extensive interviews.

After lunch, a forum with young people, Germans from our tour, as well as local young Czechs, extended the sharing of memories, and providing some insight for the audience of what life in the Ghetto was like during the 1941-45 period.

On the third day, a morning was spent in the Ghetto museum, which traces not only the history of the Ghetto, but also provides the story of its links with the overall connection with the Holocaust.

Later that day, the journey back to Stuttgart took place, which was not only a geographical one from one place to another, but in many ways a symbolic one, completing the circle, from its origins to the place of internment and deprivation, and back to normality. But also one of retracing the events of past and return to a orderly world of the everyday.

While some six decades may have elapsed from the original event, it was still full of being a very real, and in many ways, highly emotionally charged journey, and indeed experience.

If there is to be a meaningful message from the project, it is one that we must never forget the past, but also that it important to build a bridge from the terrible events of the past to a better future, where it hopefully can never again happen.

22. POSTSCRIPT

I have often wondered about many things. One of these is the question of how I came to survive when many did not. Was it just random chance, or is there indeed a power that guides our destinies and if so, why? It is probably a question I will never know the answer to. Unlike Douglas Adams of *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* fame, I don't believe the answer is 'forty-two'. That would be too simple.

It has been said that those who forget history may be forced to re-live it. With the passing of time, we who lived through these times and personal experiences will not be here to relate them and it is important for future generations to have a first hand account. We who have survived not only have a duty to leave a testimony for the future, but indeed to honour the memory of the six million who perished, to leave a record to ensure they did not disappear without a trace into the dusty corridors of history. It has been said that if they are forgotten, they will have perished twice.

I believe all those of us who have survived see life through a different lens and that we have a responsibility to tell others about it. This becomes more urgent today, when with time less and less are left to record their experiences. We

have also seen the rise of the Revisionist historians, who claim it never happened. There are thousands of stories, but it is important to leave a record behind of what really happened. Very soon it will become just another dusty chapter of history with no human element in it. We may forgive one day, but we must never forget.

Recently, in September 2003, I took a journey back to my past, that in many ways evoked painful memories, but also provided the opportunity to arrive at a partial closure after almost six decades.

We were invited to take part by a Foundation in Stuttgart in the project - Signs of Remembrance.

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BLURB

In 1936 Garry Fabian's family fled Germany to Czechoslovakia, hoping to escape Nazi persecution, but in vain. By 1942 Garry, aged eight, was interned in Theresienstadt. He was to spend till May 1945 in that 'model' concentration camp and was one of only about 150 children of the 15,000 who entered its gates, to survive. This book bears witness to the real story of what happened in that infamous camp. Remarkably, his parents also survived the camps and were able to build a new life in Australia. This is a story of amazing courage and resilience.